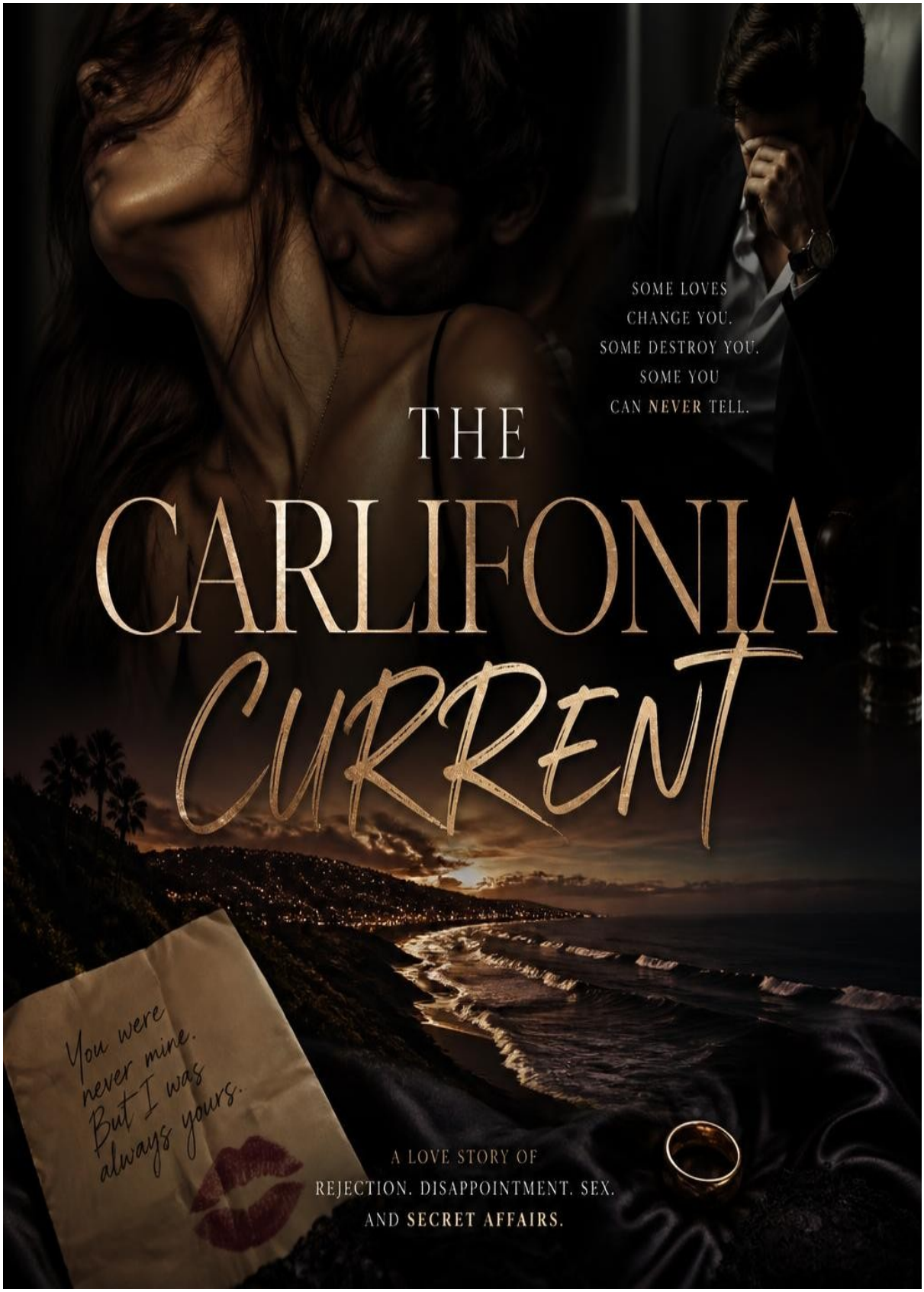
SOME LOVES
CHANGE YOU.
SOME DESTROY YOU.
SOME YOU
CAN NEVER TELL.
THE
CARLIFONIA
CURRENT
You were never mine. But I was always yours.
A LOVE STORY OF
REJECTION. DISAPPOINTMENT. SEX.
AND SECRET AFFAIRS.

Chapter One

The Stylist’s Knife

The Pacific was a lie that morning.

Maya Chen stood at the edge of the Malibu rental’s infinity pool, watching the water spill over into the ocean beyond, an optical trick designed to make rich people feel like gods. The sky was that particular shade of California blue that hurt to look at—aggressively beautiful, the kind of light that made every imperfection on a plate of food look intentional.

She adjusted a single chive blossom by two millimeters.

“Maya.” The photographer, a twitchy man named Darren who had once shot for *Vogue* and never let anyone forget it, lowered his camera. “It was fine where it was.”

“It was leaning toward the salt flat,” she said without looking up. “The client’s whole brief is ‘structured wildness.’ Leaning is chaotic. This”—she gestured to the blossom’s new angle— “is deliberate asymmetry.”

Darren sighed. Behind him, two assistants hovered with diffusers. The chef’s rep stood with arms crossed, checking her phone. A stylist’s job was to be invisible until something went wrong,

and Maya had made herself so invisible over the last three years that she sometimes forgot she had a body beneath the cargo pants and the leather apron.

The dish was a thing of engineered beauty: a single scallop, seared to bronze, floating in a coral-colored broth made from fermented carrot and something called “pumpkin garum” that smelled like umami and ambition. Edible flowers—nasturtiums, borage, and one reckless orchid—were arranged in a constellation that suggested wind had blown them there. Maya had spent forty-five minutes on that constellation.

“Ten minutes to sunset,” Darren announced.

The crew snapped into focus. Maya stepped back, wiping her hands on a towel tucked into her belt. She watched the light shift from gold to rose to something almost indecently warm. The scallop glowed. The ocean sparkled. The chive blossom held its deliberate lean.

This, she thought, *is why I don’t do weddings anymore. Too much beauty. It makes people stupid.*

The shoot wrapped at 7:14 p.m. The client was ecstatic. The chef’s rep shook Maya’s hand twice. Darren asked if she wanted to grab a drink. She said no so quickly that he blinked.

“You ever take a night off?” he asked, half joking.

“Tonight’s my night off,” she said. “I’m going home to watch a documentary about the collapse of the North Atlantic cod fishery.”

He didn’t know if she was joking. Neither did she.

The drive back to her apartment in Silver Lake took fifty-three minutes. She timed it. She timed everything—the commute, the boil of pasta water, the exact number of minutes she allowed herself to stare at the ceiling before sleep was legally allowed to claim her.

Her building was a four-unit Spanish-style rehab with cracked terra-cotta tiles and a jacaranda tree that dropped purple blossoms into the courtyard like a slow, fragrant violence. She lived on the second floor, in a one-bedroom that cost too much and felt too empty.

She let herself in. Kicked off her Birkenstocks. Walked to the kitchen.

The refrigerator was spotless inside. Three kinds of miso. A half lemon wrapped in beeswax. Filtered water. No leftovers from restaurants, no takeout containers, no evidence that anyone had ever been hungry here.

She poured herself a glass of cold sake and stood at the window.

Below, a couple walked their dog—a corgi with a waddle that made Maya's chest ache for no good reason. The woman laughed at something the man said. He put his arm around her. It was the most ordinary thing in the world, and Maya had to look away.

Her phone buzzed.

Jordan (9:14 PM): don't tell me you're home already
Jordan (9:14 PM): you are home already aren't you
Jordan (9:15 PM): maya i swear to god

She smiled despite herself. Jordan was twenty-nine, nonbinary, and possessed of an optimism so stubborn that Maya sometimes wondered if it was a performance. They were her assistant, technically, but the word felt wrong. Jordan was more like a human bridge to a world Maya had stopped believing in.

Maya (9:17 PM): The cod fishery documentary awaits.

Jordan (9:17 PM): you are a tragedy in human form
Jordan (9:18 PM): did you at least eat

Maya (9:18 PM): I tasted the scallop.

Jordan (9:18 PM): TASTING IS NOT EATING
Jordan (9:19 PM): i’m coming over tomorrow with pho. you don’t get a vote.

She set the phone down and walked to the bathroom.

The mirror showed her what she expected: thirty-two years old, sharp cheekbones, dark hair pulled into a knot so tight it pulled at her temples. She had her mother’s eyes—deep-set, watchful, always calculating escape routes. Her body was lean from carrying equipment up and down stairs, from never quite finishing meals, from the low-grade hum of control that had kept her alive through the divorce and the year after it.

Divorce. The word still felt like a stone in her mouth.

She turned on the shower. While the water heated, she opened the medicine cabinet. Behind the aspirin and the spare toothbrush was a photograph, facedown. She turned it over.

Dahlia. Smiling. Their last anniversary, two years ago, on a beach in Oaxaca. Dahlia’s arm around Maya’s waist. Maya’s head on Dahlia’s shoulder. Both of them tan and drunk and so

certain that love was something you could build a life on.

Three weeks after that photo was taken, Maya found the text messages. Six months of them. A woman named Priya who Dahlia had called “just a friend” until the hotel receipts proved otherwise.

Maya had not cried during the divorce proceedings. She had not cried during the move, or the first six months alone, or the night she deleted Dahlia’s number and then immediately had to stop herself from memorizing it again. She had cried exactly once: standing in this very shower, six months ago, when a song came on that Dahlia used to hum in the kitchen.

She put the photograph back, facedown. Closed the cabinet.

The water was hot enough to hurt. She stood under it for seventeen minutes, watching the dirt of the day—scallop juice, pollen from the edible flowers, the faint residue of desperation—spiral down the drain.

Afterward, she wrapped herself in a towel and sat on the edge of her bed. The documentary played on her laptop. A fisherman in Newfoundland spoke about the day the cod ran out. His voice was flat, emptied of grief by time.

That’s what I sound like now, Maya thought. *When I talk about her.*

She reached for her phone again. Not to call Jordan. Not to text anyone.

She opened a browser and typed: *Big Sur cabin rentals private beach.*

She didn’t know why. She had no plans to go anywhere. Her calendar was full for the next eight weeks: a cookbook shoot for a celebrity chef named Leo Vance, a wedding in Sonoma, a product launch for a ceramicist who wanted “aspirational bowl content.”

But the search results loaded anyway. Cabins with wood stoves. A-frame windows facing the Pacific. One listing showed a photograph of a hand-built walnut table, rough edges softened by candlelight.

She stared at that table for a long time.

Then she closed the laptop, turned off the light, and lay in the dark, listening to the distant thrum of the 101 freeway—a sound like a river that never stopped, carrying people to and from lives she could no longer imagine for herself.

Outside, the jacaranda dropped another blossom onto the cracked tiles.

Maya Chen did not sleep that night.

But for the first time in a long time, she wanted to.

Chapter Two

The Carpenter’s Hands

The walnut plank had a knot the size of a silver dollar, and Ezra West had been staring at it for eleven minutes.

He stood in the open-air workshop behind his cabin, thirty feet from the edge of a cliff that dropped into the Pacific. The air smelled of redwood, salt, and the particular sweetness of sawdust settling on damp skin. Fog crawled up the Big Sur coastline like something alive, swallowing the horizon in slow, deliberate breaths.

The knot was not a flaw. The client—a tech CEO with a vacation home in Carmel—had specifically requested “character.” But Ezra could see what the knot really was: a scar where a branch had once been, torn away by wind or weight or the simple violence of growing. The tree had healed over it, but the mark remained.

You see yourself in everything, he thought. *That's not insight. That's disease.*

He picked up a cabinet scraper and began to work the surface again, pulling long, translucent curls of wood away. The rhythm was familiar: push, lift, reset. Push, lift, reset. It occupied his hands so his mind could not escape entirely.

His phone buzzed on the workbench.

He ignored it.

It buzzed again.

Still ignoring.

A third time, then stopped. The silence that followed was worse than the noise.

Ezra set down the scraper and wiped his palms on his canvas apron. The phone screen showed three missed calls from Samira and a single text:

Samira (9:43 AM): I'm not dead. You don't get to screen me like I'm a bill collector.

He exhaled through his nose—not quite a laugh, but close enough. Samira Farsi was thirty-eight, five years older, and had been raising him since their mother died, even though he had been twenty-three at the time and nominally an adult. She ran a vineyard in Napa Valley with the same ferocity she used to shoo away his silences.

He typed back:

Ezra (9:45 AM): I'm working.

Samira (9:45 AM): You're always working. When was the last time you talked to a human being who wasn't buying a table?

He considered the question. Three days ago, he had driven into the village for groceries and exchanged seven words with the cashier at the general store. *"No bags, thanks. Have a good one."* That counted. Probably.

Ezra (9:46 AM): Tuesday.

Samira (9:46 AM): The cashier doesn't count.

He put the phone down and picked up the scraper again.

The cabin had been his for four years, purchased with money he never expected to have—a military death benefit, an inheritance from an aunt he barely remembered, and a small loan from Samira that she refused to let him repay. It was two bedrooms, one bathroom, and a kitchen so small you could cook and wash dishes without moving your feet. The windows faced west, which meant every evening he watched the sun fall into the ocean like a coin into a slot machine.

He had rebuilt the workshop himself. Framed it. Wired it. Insulated it with recycled denim because the fiberglass made his hands itch. The tools on the walls were organized by size, then

by frequency of use, then again by weight. The order was not obsessive. It was necessary.

At night, when the fog rolled in thick enough to mute the sound of the waves, he sometimes stood in the workshop and ran his fingers along the grain of whatever piece he was building. Walnut. Oak. Cedar. Maple. Each wood had a different temperature. Walnut was warm, almost human. Oak was cool and stubborn. Cedar smelled like the inside of a memory he couldn't quite reach.

Tonight, he would finish the table's final polish. Tomorrow, he would drive it to Carmel and watch a stranger run their hand across the surface and pretend to understand what it had cost him to make it.

But first: the phone rang again.

He answered this time. "I'm fine."

"Liar," Samira said. Her voice was warm, accented with the Farsi she'd refused to let him forget. "You sound like you've been breathing sawdust for twelve hours."

"Only ten."

"That's not better. That's worse. Listen." A pause. Papers shuffled on her end. "The harvest dinner is in three weeks. I need you there."

"No."

"You didn't let me finish."

"I don't need to. You want me to sit at a long table with strangers and pretend I enjoy small talk. I don't."

Samira sighed. "The dinner is for the cookbook. A photographer, a stylist, some very boring wine writers. You won't have to talk to anyone. You can stand in a corner and glower. It's what you're good at."

"I'm good at other things."

"Name one."

He looked down at his hands. The knuckles were scarred—not from the workshop, but from before. From pulling men out of wrecked vehicles in Helmand Province. From pressing his palms against wounds that wouldn't stop bleeding. From the week he spent in a field hospital after a mortar strike, holding the hand of a nineteen-year-old who kept asking for his mother.

"That's what I thought," Samira said softly.

Ezra turned toward the ocean. The fog had thickened; he could no longer see the water, only hear it, a constant shush against the rocks below.

"Why do you keep asking?" he said. "You know I'll say no. I always say no."

"Because one day you won't."

He closed his eyes. "Samira."

"I'm not trying to fix you. I'm trying to keep you from disappearing entirely. There's a difference." She paused. "Three weeks. Saturday the fourteenth. Come for the dinner, stay the night, leave before breakfast if you have to. I won't even make you eat the salad."

Ezra almost smiled. Almost.

"I'll think about it."

"That's not a yes."

"It's not a no."

He could hear her smile through the phone. "Fine. I'll take it. But Ezra?" Her voice softened. "You can't build enough tables to fill the silence forever. At some point, you have to let someone sit at one."

She hung up before he could argue.

He worked until the light failed.

The table was finished: thirty-six by seventy-two inches, solid black walnut, legs tapered at an angle that made the whole thing look like it was

about to take flight. He had inlaid a single strip of brass into one corner—not for the client, but for himself. A secret. A signature.

He swept the floor. He oiled his tools. He wiped down every surface until the workshop smelled of citrus solvent and honest labor.

Then he walked to the edge of the cliff.

The fog had swallowed the stars. The ocean was a rumor below him, felt more than seen. He stood with his hands in his pockets, barefoot on the cold earth, and let the wind pull at his shirt.

He thought about Samira's words. *Let someone sit at one.*

He thought about the last time he had eaten dinner with another person. It had been eleven months ago, a contractor from Monterey who had come to buy a set of chairs. They had shared a beer on the porch. The man had asked if Ezra was married. Ezra had said no. The man had asked if he was seeing anyone. Ezra had said, "I don't," and the man had understood enough not to ask again.

He thought about Afghanistan. Not the big moments—the explosions, the screaming, the heat so thick you could taste it. He thought about the small ones. The way the dust settled on everything. The taste of lukewarm water from

a plastic bottle. The silence after a patient died, when there was nothing left to do but close their eyes and sit with the fact that you had failed.

He had been a medic. He had saved seventeen men, maybe eighteen, depending on how you counted. He had lost three. Their names were tattooed on his ribs, just below his heart: *Ramirez. Okonkwo. Davies.*

He carried them the way the walnut tree carried its knot. The scar didn't go away. You just built something around it.

Ezra turned away from the cliff and walked back to the cabin.

Inside, he lit a single candle—the same one he had been burning down for months, the wax pooling into strange, accidental sculptures. He sat on the floor, back against the wall, and pulled out a worn paperback. *The Snow Leopard*, by Peter Matthiessen. A man walking through the Himalayas, looking for a ghost.

He read the same paragraph three times. The words did not stick.

He closed the book and listened to the house settle. The wood contracted in the cooling air. The water heater clicked on, then off. Somewhere in the walls, a mouse lived a secret life.

His phone buzzed one last time.

Samira (10:02 PM): I love you. Even when you're impossible. Especially then.

He didn't reply.

But he left the candle burning until dawn, because the dark in the cabin was the same as the dark outside, and he was tired of being alone with it.

Chapter Three

Salt and Cedar

Maya left Los Angeles at 5:47 on a Friday morning, before the freeway turned into a parking lot, before the sun remembered how to burn.

She told herself it was just a drive. A long weekend. Something to tell Jordan when they asked, *what did you do for yourself?* so she wouldn't have to lie and say *nothing* again. She packed a single bag—jeans, a sweater, two books she wouldn't read—and pointed her Subaru north on the 101.

By 8:30, she had passed through Santa Barbara and was climbing into the coastal ranges. The radio picked up a station playing old Fleetwood Mac, and she let it play without changing it, because the day already felt like a dream she hadn't consented to having.

Stop being dramatic, she told herself. *It's just asphalt and gasoline.*

But the ocean kept appearing on her left—sudden, vast, the color of slate under the morning fog—and something in her chest kept loosening with each mile.

She had not planned to go to Big Sur. She had planned to drive to Monterey, maybe Carmel, maybe just turn around at San Luis Obispo and call it an adventure. But the highway signs kept pulling her north, and the name *Big Sur* kept appearing in her memory like a half-remembered song.

The cabin with the walnut table.

She had bookmarked the listing two nights ago, unable to explain why. She hadn't rented it. Hadn't even looked at the price. But the image had lodged behind her eyes: candlelight on wood, windows facing the Pacific, a hand-built table rough enough to feel honest.

She was thinking about that table when the Subaru made a sound like a handful of bolts in a blender.

"Shit," she said aloud.

The dashboard lit up like a Christmas tree. The steering wheel pulled hard to the right. She guided the car onto the shoulder of Highway 1, which was approximately six inches wider than the car itself, with a drop-off on her left that went straight down to rocks and regret.

She killed the engine. The silence was immediate and total.

No cell service. Of course. She was in a pocket of the coast where the cliffs ate signals and the nearest tow truck was probably forty minutes away, assuming anyone was even open at—she checked her watch—9:17 on a Friday morning.

Maya got out of the car and stood on the shoulder, hands on her hips, and surveyed the situation. The rear driver's-side tire was flat. Not just flat—shredded. A piece of metal, possibly a screw or a nail, glinted in the rubber like a terrible jewel.

"I don't know how to change a tire," she admitted to the ocean.

The ocean did not respond.

She was ten minutes into wrestling with the jack—a device that seemed to have been designed by someone who hated the human race—when she heard the engine.

It was not the roar of a sports car or the rumble of a truck. It was something older: a diesel engine, slow and deliberate, the sound of a vehicle that had been maintained by someone who loved it.

An old Ford pickup pulled up behind her. Forest green, rust around the wheel wells, a surfboard strapped to the roof rack for no reason she could identify (they were miles from any decent break).

The driver's door opened.

He was tall—six-two, maybe six-three—with shoulders that looked like they'd been carved from the same wood he probably worked with. Dark jeans, worn boots, a gray henley with sleeves pushed to his elbows. His hair was the color of wet cedar, and it fell across his forehead in a way that suggested he didn't care where it fell. His face was all angles: sharp jaw, high cheekbones, a nose that had been broken at least once.

But it was his hands she noticed first. Large. Scars across the knuckles. Fingers that looked like they could crush stone but moved with a careful precision as he walked toward her.

"Car trouble?" he said.

His voice was low, quiet, the kind of voice you had to lean in to hear. It was not a friendly voice, exactly—there was no warmth in it, no performance of helpfulness. It was simply a voice stating a fact, the same way he might note that the fog was rolling in or that the tide was coming up.

Maya, who had spent years reading people's faces for micro-expressions (chefs lying about ingredient sources, clients pretending to like a garnish they secretly hated), found that she could not read his at all.

"Flat tire," she said. "And I'm discovering that AAA does not cover existential despair."

Something flickered in his eyes. Not quite a smile, but close. A softening at the corners.

"You have a spare?"

"In the trunk. Under approximately forty pounds of photography equipment I forgot I had."

He nodded and walked to the back of her car. She followed, because she was not the kind of

woman who stood still while a stranger handled her problems, even if she desperately wanted to be that woman for just five minutes.

He popped the trunk. Found the spare. Found the jack she had been swearing at. Found the lug wrench she hadn't even known existed.

"You've never done this before," he said. Not a question.

"I'm a food stylist. We pay other people to get their hands dirty."

He looked at her then—really looked, for the first time. His eyes were gray, the color of the Pacific under fog, and they moved across her face like he was reading something written in a language he barely remembered.

"You're bleeding," he said.

She looked down. A thin line of red ran across her palm, probably from the jagged edge of the wheel cover she'd tried to pry off.

"It's nothing."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a bandana—faded red, soft from washing—and held it out to her. She took it. Their fingers brushed.

His skin was warm. Callused. The kind of warm that suggested he ran hot, even in the coastal chill.

"Thank you," she said.

He nodded again and knelt beside the flat tire.

For the next twenty minutes, she watched him work. He didn't speak, didn't explain what he was doing, didn't try to make conversation. He just moved through the task with an economy that bordered on grace: jack under the frame, lug nuts off, flat tire off, spare on, lug nuts tightened, jack down.

When he was finished, he stood and wiped his hands on his jeans, leaving dark smudges on the denim.

"It'll get you to a shop," he said. "There's one in Lucia, about fifteen miles north. They're honest."

"How do you know?"

He shrugged one shoulder. "I built their counter."

Maya laughed—a surprised, unguarded sound that she hadn't expected to make. "You built their counter. So, you're a carpenter."

"I build things."

"And you stop for strangers on the highway with flat tires."

"You were holding the jack upside down."

She looked down at the jack in her hand. She had, in fact, been holding it upside down.

"I would have figured it out eventually," she said.

He almost smiled that not-smile again. "Eventually."

They stood there for a moment, the fog pressing in around them, the ocean crashing somewhere below. She should get in her car and drive north. He should get in his truck and go back to whatever cabin or workshop or solitary life he had emerged from.

Instead, she said, "What's your name?"

A pause. He looked at her—really looked again—and she felt it like a hand on her chest. Not intrusive. Not predatory. Just present. Just seen.

"Ezra," he said.

"Maya."

He nodded, as if filing it away. "The shop in Lucia. Ask for Frank. Tell him Ezra sent you."

"And that will get me a discount?"

"It'll get you not cheated. That's better."

He turned and walked back to his truck. She watched him go—the way he moved, loose-limbed and unhurried, like a man who had never once rushed toward anything in his life.

He got in. The diesel engine rumbled to life.

He did not wave. He did not look back.

The truck pulled onto the highway and disappeared into the fog.

Maya stood on the shoulder for a full minute, the bandana still wrapped around her palm, the taste of salt and cedar in the air.

She had no idea why she had asked his name. She had no idea why she had told him hers.

She only knew that for the first time in two years, her chest did not feel like a room she was afraid to enter.

She drove north to Lucia.

The shop was exactly where he said it would be: a gray building with a sign that said *FRANK'S GARAGE* in letters that were falling off one by one. Frank was a man in his seventies with a beard that looked like it had been there since the Nixon administration. He took one look at her shredded tire and said, "Ezra send you?"

"Yes."

"He always did like fixin' what other people broke."

Frank replaced the tire in twenty minutes, charged her forty dollars, and did not try to upsell her on anything.

"Where's he live?" Maya asked as Frank handed back her keys.

"Who?"

"Ezra."

Frank squinted at her. "Why?"

"I want to thank him."

Frank chewed on something that might have been a toothpick or might have been a piece of jerky. "South of here. About twelve miles. Little cabin off the highway. No mailbox. You'll miss it if you blink."

She thanked him and got back in the car.

She did not go south.

She drove north instead, to Monterey, to a hotel she booked on a whim, to a dinner she ate alone at a bar while pretending to read a book.

But that night, lying in a hotel bed that smelled like bleach and bad decisions, she pulled out her phone and searched for *cabin rentals Big Sur walnut table* again.

She found the listing.

She booked it.

Three weeks from now. Just before the harvest dinner Samira had hired her for.

Coincidence, she told herself. *Just a job. Just a weekend. Just a cabin with a table she'd never actually see because Ezra probably lived nowhere near it and she was being ridiculous.*

She set the phone down and pressed her palm—still wrapped in the faded red bandana—to her chest.

She fell asleep to the sound of her own heartbeat, imagining it was the ocean.

Chapter 4

The Call from Napa

The email arrived on a Tuesday, three days after Maya returned from the coast.

She was in her kitchen, testing a recipe for a client who wanted "deconstructed coq au vin" that looked like something a French grandmother would serve if that grandmother had an MFA in conceptual art. The chicken thigh had been precisely seared, the pearl onions glazed to the color of amber, the bacon lardons arranged in a Fibonacci spiral that made her own eyes roll.

Her phone buzzed.

Jordan (10:34 AM): check your email. now.

Maya (10:34 AM): I'm working.

Jordan (10:34 AM): i don't care. this is the one. the big one. the one I've been manifesting for you.

Maya wiped her hands on her apron and opened her email.

Subject: Harvest Dinner – Napa Valley – Samira Farsi

Body: Ms. Chen, my name is Samira Farsi. I own Saffron & Stone Vineyard in Napa. I'm looking for a food stylist for our annual harvest dinner—a small, private event (40 guests) celebrating the release of our new cookbook. The photographer has worked with you before (Darren Liu; he speaks very highly of your "violent commitment to symmetry"). I'd love to discuss. Are you free for a call this afternoon?

Maya read it twice.

Samira Farsi. She had heard the name—one of the few women of color running a major vineyard in Napa, known for her Pinot Noir and her refusal to appear in magazine spreads that didn't feature her vineyard workers by name. The cookbook had been in development for two

years, and every stylist in California had been angling for the job.

And Darren had recommended her. Darren, who she had declined drinks with. Darren, who had called her commitment to symmetry *violent*.

She smiled. Violent was good. Violent meant memorable.

Maya (10:36 AM): When's the call?

Jordan (10:36 AM): 2pm. i already put it in your calendar. i already wrote your talking points. i already picked out what you're going to wear (virtually, but still).

Maya (10:36 AM): You're terrifying.

Jordan (10:36 AM): that's why you keep me around.

The call lasted twenty-three minutes.

Samira Farsi had a voice like honey over gravel—warm, but with an edge that suggested she had fired more people than she had hired. She asked Maya about her philosophy (control as a form of love), her favorite ingredients (anything fermented), and her least favorite trend (edible glitter, which she called "the herpes of the culinary world").

Samira laughed at that. Actually laughed, a full sound that made Maya like her immediately.

"The dinner is three weeks from Saturday," Samira said. "The menu is built around the harvest—figs, late-season stone fruit, a lot of things that want to fall apart on the plate. I need someone who can make decay look intentional."

"That's my specialty," Maya said.

"I know. Darren told me about the scallop."

Maya blinked. "The scallop?"

"The one with the chive blossom. He said you adjusted it two millimeters. He said it was insane. He said it was the most beautiful thing he'd ever photographed."

"He's prone to hyperbole."

"He's prone to honesty, which is worse." Samira paused. "There's one more thing. The dinner is at my home, on the vineyard property. Guests will include the cookbook team, some press, a few friends and family. You'd stay the night—guest cottage. We'd feed you. You'd hate the food because you'll spend all your time arranging it, but you'd eat it anyway because you're polite."

"I'm not that polite."

"Good. Then you'll fit in."

Maya almost said yes on the spot. Almost. But something held her back—a flicker of caution, the ghost of a bad decision made in the name of a good opportunity.

"I'll need to see the space," Maya said. "The light, the table, the serving vessels. I don't style in the dark."

"Understood. Can you come up next week? Monday or Tuesday?"

"Tuesday."

"Perfect. I'll send you the address. And Maya?" Samira's voice softened, just slightly. "Darren also told me you're lonely. He said it like it was a professional liability. I'm telling you it's not. Some of the best work comes from people who have nowhere else to put their attention."

Samira hung up before Maya could respond.

Maya stared at her phone.

Darren told me you're lonely.

She was going to kill him. Slowly. With a dull offset spatula.

But she was also going to Napa.

Jordan was waiting in her apartment when Maya got home that night.

Not literally—Jordan had a key, but they respected boundaries enough to text before letting themselves in. Tonight, however, they had not texted. They had simply appeared on her couch with a bottle of natural wine and a takeout container of pho, two chopsticks tucked behind their ear like a beautiful, chaotic insect.

"I let myself in," Jordan said. "I know you hate it. I don't care."

Maya dropped her bag by the door. "You're insufferable."

"I'm your best friend. Same thing." Jordan poured wine into two glasses—real glasses, not the mason jars Maya usually drank from. "You got the job."

"I got the job."

"Say it like you mean it."

Maya sat down on the couch, took the wine, and let her shoulder press against Jordan's. They were warm, as always, and they smelled like sandalwood and the particular optimism of someone who had never been broken by love.

"I got the job," she said again. This time, she almost believed it.

Jordan raised their glass. "To Samira Farsi, whoever she is."

"To not being lonely on a Tuesday night."

They drank. The pho was perfect—broth rich with star anise, noodles slippery and obedient, basil and lime on the side because Jordan knew how Maya ate. She had taught them, over three years of late nights and early mornings, the small rituals that made a meal into a ceremony.

"So," Jordan said, twirling a noodle around their chopstick. "What's the catch?"

"What do you mean?"

"There's always a catch. You have that look. The 'I'm not telling you something' look."

Maya set down her chopsticks. She had not told Jordan about the flat tire. About the man on the highway. About the bandana still sitting on her nightstand, unwashed, because it smelled like cedar and she was not ready to let that go.

"There's no catch," she said.

Jordan studied her face. Their eyes were dark, sharp, the kind of eyes that had seen Maya through the divorce, through the crying-in-the-shower phase, through the six months when she only ate protein bars because cooking felt like a betrayal of the life she used to have.

"You're lying," Jordan said softly. "But it's okay. You'll tell me when you're ready."

Maya looked away.

Across the room, on her nightstand, the red bandana waited.

That night, after Jordan left, Maya lay in bed and scrolled through the Big Sur cabin listing again.

She had booked it for the weekend after the Napa dinner. A reward. A private celebration. A chance to sit at that walnut table and pretend she was the kind of person who took vacations alone without feeling like she was running away from something.

She zoomed in on the photograph of the table. The grain was beautiful—dark, swirling, the kind of wood that seemed to hold light instead of reflecting it. The chairs were mismatched but intentional: one vintage, one modern, one that looked hand-carved by someone who knew exactly how much pressure to apply.

I build things, he had said.

She thought about Ezra's hands. The scars. The warmth. The way he had knelt in the dirt to change her tire without being asked, without expecting thanks, without performing kindness for an audience.

She opened a new browser tab and searched: *carpenter Big Sur walnut furniture.*

The results were useless. Generic websites. Etsy shops. A man in Oregon who spelled "walnut" with two Ls.

She searched: *Ezra carpenter Big Sur.*

Nothing.

She searched: *Ezra furniture California.*

A single result. A small gallery in Carmel that sold "handcrafted heirloom pieces by regional artists." The page showed photographs of tables and chairs and cabinets, each one more beautiful than the last. At the bottom of the page, a list of artists.

One name: *Ezra West.*

No photo. No bio. Just a name.

But the tables in the photographs—the walnut grain, the tapered legs, the single strip of brass inlaid like a secret—they looked exactly like the table in the cabin listing.

Maya closed her laptop and pressed her hand to her chest.

Coincidence, she told herself.

Just a carpenter. Just a cabin. Just a man who changed your tire and didn't even say goodbye.

She fell asleep with the name *Ezra West* echoing in her head like a song she hadn't heard yet but somehow already knew.

Chapter Five

The Dinner (Part One)

The drive to Napa took ninety minutes, which gave Maya exactly enough time to change her outfit three times in her head and discard every option as either too formal, not formal enough, or cursed by association with an ex-girlfriend who had once worn something similar.

She settled on a deep green wrap dress that made her look like she belonged on a vineyard—earthy, elegant, unbothered by the fact that she had spent the morning stress-chopping vegetables in her kitchen. The dress had pockets. This felt like a victory.

Jordan had texted her before she left: *"Remember: you're not there to impress anyone. You're there to style food so beautiful it makes people cry. If you cry first, that's also fine. You're human."*

She had not responded. She was not sure she agreed with the last part.

The vineyard appeared at the end of a long driveway lined with sycamore trees, their leaves

just beginning to turn. Saffron & Stone was not the kind of winery that advertised from the highway. No billboards, no tasting room with a gift shop full of overpriced candles. Just a low-slung stone building, a cluster of oak barrels visible through open doors, and a house that looked like it had been built slowly, over generations, by people who intended to stay.

Maya parked her Subaru between a Tesla and a mud-spattered Jeep. She took a breath. She got out.

The air smelled like crushed grapes and dust and something green she couldn't name. A breeze moved through the sycamores, and for a moment, she understood why people wrote poems about California. Not the Los Angeles California of freeways and false promises, but this California—the one that had existed long before the strip malls, the one that held space for silence.

"Ms. Chen."

Samira Farsi stood on the porch of the main house, wiping her hands on a dish towel. She was shorter than Maya expected, with a strong jaw and dark hair pulled into a low bun. She wore jeans and a linen button-down, no jewelry except a single silver ring on her thumb.

"Maya," Maya said. "Please."

"Maya." Samira smiled. It transformed her face from professional to warm, from guarded to almost tender. "Welcome. You're early."

"I like to see the light before it changes."

"Darren said you'd say that." Samira stepped off the porch and extended her hand. Maya shook it. Samira's grip was firm, dry, the hand of someone who worked for a living. "Come on. I'll show you the kitchen, the dining room, and the three places where you'll want to stage the dishes. The fourth place is a trap—the light there is beautiful for ten minutes and then it vanishes. Don't fall in love with it."

"I fall in love with everything," Maya said. "That's the problem."

Samira glanced at her. "No. The problem is you stop yourself before it goes anywhere."

Maya said nothing. She followed Samira into the house.

The kitchen was a dream.

Industrial range. A farmhouse sink big enough to bathe a small child. Shelves lined with cookbooks and mismatched pottery and jars of dried chilies that looked like they had been there

for years. A long wooden table in the center of the room, scarred from decades of chopping and spilling and living.

"You'll work here," Samira said, gesturing to the table. "The finished dishes will go to the dining room, but the staging happens here. I want you to have space to breathe."

Maya ran her hand along the table's surface. The wood was warm, dented, loved. She imagined the meals that had been made on it—celebrations, arguments, ordinary Tuesdays that no one remembered but the table itself.

"It's beautiful," she said.

"It was my grandmother's." Samira's voice softened. "She came here from Iran in 1979 with nothing but a suitcase and this table. My father bolted it to the floor of their first apartment so no one could take it."

"That's the most romantic thing I've ever heard."

"It's not romance. It's survival." Samira turned toward the doorway. "Come. The dining room is through here."

The dining room faced west. Floor-to-ceiling windows looked out over the vineyard, the rows of vines marching toward the hills like soldiers in a beautiful, terrible formation. The table in

the center of the room was long enough for forty guests, draped in linen so white it hurt to look at.

Maya walked to the window. The light was golden, slanted, the kind of light that made every glass and every plate and every human face look like a painting.

"The dinner is at sunset," Samira said. "You'll have an hour of this light. Use it well."

"I will."

"Good." Samira checked her watch. "The chef arrives in two hours. The photographer in three. My brother should be here any minute, though he'll probably hide in the guest cottage until dinner starts, because he's incapable of being on time for anything except his own misery."

Maya turned from the window. "Your brother?"

"Ezra. He's a carpenter. He builds things so he doesn't have to talk to people." Samira smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "He's been through a lot. We don't talk about it. You don't have to talk to him at all, if you'd rather not. He won't be offended."

Maya's heart stopped.

Not metaphorically. Actually stopped, for a full second, the way it does when you're falling and you haven't hit the ground yet.

Ezra.

The carpenter. The brother. The man on the highway with the gray eyes and the broken nose and the hands that changed her tire without being asked.

"Maya?" Samira was looking at her. "You've gone pale. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," Maya said. "Just—the light. It's very intense."

Samira raised an eyebrow but didn't push. "I'll leave you to explore. Dinner's at seven. Wear something comfortable. And Maya?"

"Yes?"

"Whatever you think is going to happen tonight, you're probably wrong." Samira walked out of the room, her footsteps soft on the stone floor. "That's not a threat. It's just how Ezra works."

Maya spent the next hour in the kitchen, pretending to examine serving platters while her mind raced.

Ezra. The same Ezra. The only Ezra in Big Sur who builds walnut tables and drives a green pickup and doesn't say goodbye.

She had not told him she was coming to Napa. She had not told him her name, really—just Maya, no last name, no context, no *I'll be at your sister's vineyard in three weeks, please don't look at me like that again or I'll forget how to breathe.*

She was considering hiding in the guest cottage until morning when she heard the truck.

She knew the sound before she saw it. That diesel engine, slow and deliberate, the sound of a vehicle that had been maintained by someone who loved it.

She walked to the window.

The green Ford pickup pulled into the driveway, kicking up dust. It parked next to her Subaru—close enough that she could see the surfboard still strapped to the roof, the rust around the wheel wells, the faded bumper sticker that said *SAVE THE WHALES* in letters so old they were almost white.

The driver's door opened.

Ezra stepped out.

He looked the same, which was somehow worse than if he had looked different. Same worn boots. Same gray henley. Same dark hair falling across his forehead. Same hands—those impossible hands, scarred and warm and capable.

He did not see her. He was looking at the house, at the vineyard, at something in the distance that Maya couldn't identify. His face was unguarded for a moment—just a moment—and she saw what Samira meant by *misery*.

Then he picked up a duffel bag from the truck bed, slung it over his shoulder, and walked toward the guest cottage.

He did not look at the main house.

He did not look at her.

Maya pressed her palm—the same palm he had wrapped in his bandana, which she had washed twice and still smelled like cedar—against the cool glass of the window.

You're not here for him, she told herself. *You're here for the job. The dinner. The cookbook. He's just a carpenter. Just a brother. Just a man who changed your tire and whose hands you haven't stopped thinking about for three weeks.*

She took a breath.

She went back to the kitchen.

She had work to do.

Dinner was at seven.

The guests arrived in waves—wine writers in linen blazers, chefs with tattoos on their knuckles, a woman who introduced herself as a "fermentation consultant" and smelled like kombucha and ambition. Maya stood near the kitchen door, watching, waiting for the moment when the food would need her.

She had styled the first course already: a chilled fig soup with goat cheese mousse and a drizzle of aged balsamic that she had placed exactly eight drops of, because seven was too few and nine was obscene.

The soup bowls were slate gray, almost black. The figs were purple and bursting. The mousse was so white it looked like snow on a volcano.

It was, she thought, the most beautiful thing she had ever made.

And she didn't care.

Because across the room, standing by the window with a glass of wine he wasn't drinking, was Ezra.

He had changed for dinner. A dark button-down, sleeves rolled to his elbows. His hair was still damp from a shower. He was looking out at the vineyard, at the last light bleeding over the hills, and he looked so alone that Maya felt it like a bruise.

She should not go to him.

She went.

"Ezra."

He turned. His gray eyes found her face. She watched the recognition move through him—slow, hesitant, like a man waking from a dream he didn't want to leave.

"Maya," he said.

He remembered her name.

She had not known, until that moment, how much she needed him to remember.

"You're Samira's brother," she said.

"I'm Samira's brother," he agreed.

"You're also the man who changed my tire."

"I'm also that." A pause. His gaze dropped to her hand, the one she had cut on the wheel cover. "It healed."

"You gave me a bandana."

"I have others."

She laughed—a small, surprised sound. "That's not the point."

"What's the point?"

She looked at him. At the lines around his eyes, the tension in his jaw, the way he held his body like he was bracing for impact.

"The point," she said, "is that you didn't tell me you'd be here."

"You didn't tell me either."

"I didn't know."

"Neither did I." He looked down at his wine glass, swirled it without seeing it. "Samira doesn't tell me anything. She just puts me in rooms and hopes I'll remember how to be human."

"And will you?"

He looked up. Met her eyes. For a long moment, neither of them spoke.

Then, softly: "I'm trying."

Behind them, Samira rang a bell and announced that dinner was served.

Ezra did not move. Neither did Maya.

Finally, he stepped back. "You should go. The soup is getting warm."

"The soup is chilled."

"Then it's getting cold."

"It's supposed to be cold."

Something flickered in his eyes—that almost-smile she had seen on the highway, the one that made her chest ache.

"Goodnight, Maya," he said.

"Goodnight, Ezra."

She walked back to the kitchen.

She did not look back.

But she felt his eyes on her the whole way.

Chapter Six

The Dinner (Part Two)

The first course went out without incident.

Maya stood behind the kitchen pass, watching the servers glide through the dining room with their slate-gray bowls, and felt the familiar hum of competence—that quiet satisfaction when something you've made with your hands lands exactly as you intended. The fig soup was a hit. She could tell by the way conversations paused

after the first spoonful, replaced by small, involuntary sounds of pleasure.

She should have been happy.

Instead, she was watching Ezra.

He sat at the far end of the long table, between a sommelier who wouldn't stop talking about tannins and a woman from *Food & Wine* who kept touching his arm. He wasn't eating. The soup sat in front of him, untouched, the mousse beginning to collapse in the heat of the room.

Eat, she thought at him. *I spent forty-five minutes on those drops of balsamic.*

As if he heard her, he looked up.

Across the room, through the candlelight and the wine glasses and the bodies of forty strangers, his gray eyes found hers.

Maya forgot to breathe.

Then Samira appeared at her elbow, holding a bottle of Pinot Noir and two glasses. "You're staring at my brother."

"I'm staring at the soup."

"Liar." Samira poured wine into both glasses and pushed one toward Maya. "Drink. You're no good to me if you pass out from dehydration."

Maya took the glass. The wine was dark, almost purple, and it tasted like blackberries and rain. "This is incredible."

"The wine or the brother?"

"The wine." Maya took another sip. "I don't know your brother."

"You changed a tire together."

"That's not knowing someone."

"No," Samira agreed. "But it's a start." She leaned against the counter, watching the dining room with the satisfied air of a general surveying a battlefield. "He hasn't talked to a stranger in months. He changed your tire. He's at this dinner, which he swore he wouldn't attend. He's not eating the soup you made, which means he's thinking about something other than food, which for Ezra is practically a religious experience."

"What are you saying?"

Samira looked at her. Really looked, the way she had looked at Maya's portfolio before hiring her—assessing, weighing, calculating.

"I'm saying," Samira said slowly, "that my brother has been dead for four years. Walking, talking, building furniture. But dead. And tonight, for the first time, I see something behind his eyes that looks like wanting."

Maya set down her wine glass. "I'm not here to resurrect anyone."

"No. You're here to style a dinner. But the thing about resurrection is that it doesn't ask for permission." Samira pushed off from the counter and walked toward the dining room. Over her shoulder, she added: "The second course goes out in ten minutes. Don't let the duck breast sit too long. It's a tragedy, cold duck."

Maya stood alone in the kitchen, the taste of Pinot Noir on her tongue, and tried very hard not to think about Ezra's hands.

She failed.

The second course was duck breast with roasted figs and a red wine reduction.

Maya had arranged it on rectangular white plates, the duck sliced on the bias, the figs halved and caramelized, the reduction drizzled in a pattern that suggested movement—as if the sauce had been caught mid-flow. It was the kind of plating that made chefs cry and critics take notes.

She carried the first plate to the pass herself, then stepped back to let the servers do their work.

Through the doorway, she watched Ezra receive his plate.

He looked at it for a long moment. Then he picked up his fork, cut a small piece of duck, and ate it.

Maya's chest expanded.

He ate a second bite. Then a third. Then he reached for his wine glass and took a long drink, and when he set the glass down, he was looking at the kitchen door.

Looking at her.

She should have looked away. She was the stylist. She was invisible. She was supposed to be a ghost, present but unseen, orchestrating beauty from the shadows.

She did not look away.

Neither did he.

The moment stretched—five seconds, ten, fifteen. Long enough for the sommelier to notice and stop talking about tannins. Long enough for the *Food & Wine* woman to withdraw her hand from his arm. Long enough for Maya to understand that something had shifted between them, something that had nothing to do with soup or duck or the harvest.

Then a server bumped into her from behind, and the spell broke.

Maya turned back to the kitchen.

Her hands were shaking.

The third course was a cheese plate.

Maya hated cheese plates. They were too easy—arrange some wedges, scatter some nuts, call it a day. But Samira had insisted on a local fromage called *Harbison*, which was wrapped in spruce bark and oozed like a beautiful, illegal dream.

Maya spent twelve minutes on the cheese plate, which was eleven minutes longer than necessary. She arranged the wedges by color, then by texture, then by the secret map of her own anxiety. She placed a small dish of honey on the side, then moved it two inches left, then two inches right, then back to the original position.

"You're overthinking it."

The voice came from behind her. Low. Quiet.

She turned.

Ezra stood in the kitchen doorway, hands in his pockets, shoulders loose. He had undone the top button of his shirt. She could see the hollow of his throat.

"The dining room is that way," she said.

"I know."

"The guests are that way."

"I know."

"They're eating your sister's food. They're drinking her wine. You should be with them."

He took a step into the kitchen. Then another. The space between them shrank.

"I don't like crowds," he said.

"You're not eating."

"I ate the duck."

"You ate three bites."

"You counted."

She flushed. "I'm a stylist. I notice details."

He stopped a few feet away from her—close enough that she could smell cedar and soap and something underneath, something warm and human and alarmingly intimate.

"The cheese plate is beautiful," he said.

"It's a cheese plate. It's supposed to be beautiful."

"No." He shook his head. "It's supposed to be cheese. You made it beautiful. That's different."

Maya looked down at the plate. The Harbison was beginning to ooze in the warmth of the kitchen lights. The honey had caught the light and turned the color of amber. The spruce bark looked like something from a fairy tale—dark, ancient, patient.

"I don't know how to talk to you," she said.

"Then don't talk."

"Ezra—"

"Maya." He said her name like he was testing it, like he wanted to feel the shape of it in his mouth. "I'm not good at this. I'm not good at dinners, or people, or standing in kitchens with women in green dresses who make me want to eat things I've forgotten how to taste."

Her heart slammed against her ribs. "What are you saying?"

He took another step. Now they were close enough that she could see the individual threads in his shirt, the small scar above his left eyebrow, the way his pulse beat in his throat.

"I'm saying," he said, "that I don't know why you're here. I don't know why you're looking at me. I don't know why I drove two hours to a dinner I swore I'd never attend, except that

Samira said your name and I couldn't stop thinking about the highway."

"The highway?"

"The way you stood there. Holding the jack upside down. Bleeding into my bandana. Looking at me like I was a person instead of a ghost."

Maya's eyes burned. She blinked. "You're not a ghost."

"Most days, I feel like one."

"Then stop feeling like one."

He laughed—a short, surprised sound, almost painful. "Just like that?"

"Just like that." She stepped forward. Now there was no space between them. She could feel the heat of him, the solid weight of his presence. "You changed my tire. You gave me your bandana. You remembered my name. You ate my duck. You're standing in my kitchen, looking at me like I'm something worth looking at. That's not a ghost. That's a man who's still here."

Ezra reached out. His hand hovered near her face—not touching, just there, close enough that she could feel the warmth radiating from his palm.

"Maya," he said again.

"Ezra," she whispered.

Behind them, someone cleared their throat.

They both turned.

Samira stood in the doorway, arms crossed, a smile playing at the corners of her mouth. "The fourth course is ready. And by 'fourth course,' I mean the dessert. And by 'dessert,' I mean you two need to either kiss or leave my kitchen. The staff is trying to work."

Maya stepped back. Her face was on fire.

Ezra didn't move. He looked at Samira, then at Maya, then back at Samira.

"She made a cheese plate," he said.

"I saw."

"It's beautiful."

"It's cheese, Ezra."

"It's *beautiful* cheese."

Samira sighed, but she was smiling. "Dessert. Ten minutes. Don't make me come find you again." She disappeared back into the dining room.

The kitchen was silent except for the hum of the refrigerator and the distant sound of forty people eating and drinking and pretending not

to notice the two people who had just almost kissed in the doorway.

Ezra looked at Maya.

"Ten minutes," he said.

"Ten minutes," she agreed.

Neither of them moved.

Then Ezra did something that undid her completely.

He smiled. Not the almost-smile from the highway, not the flicker from the dinner table. A real smile—small, crooked, uncertain, but real.

"I'm glad you're here," he said.

Then he walked out of the kitchen and back to the dining room, leaving Maya alone with a cheese plate, a bottle of wine, and the certain knowledge that she was in terrible, irreversible trouble.

Chapter Seven

The Morning After (Not Like That)

Maya woke to sunlight the color of honey and the sound of birds she couldn't name.

For a moment, she didn't know where she was. The ceiling was wrong—wooden beams instead of plaster, a skylight instead of a fan. The sheets were wrong too: heavier than her own, with the

faint scent of lavender and something earthier, like dried herbs.

Then she remembered.

Saffron & Stone. The guest cottage. The dinner. The kitchen. *Ezra.*

She sat up so fast her vision went white.

The cottage was small but immaculate—a bed, a writing desk, a window that faced the vineyard. Her clothes from last night hung over the back of a chair, and her phone was on the nightstand with seventeen unread messages from Jordan.

She did not look at them. She was not ready for Jordan's intuition.

She pressed her palms to her face and breathed.

Nothing had happened. That was the thing. After the kitchen—after the almost-kiss, after Samira's interruption, after Ezra's smile—they had both returned to the dining room like nothing had changed. Maya had styled the dessert (a lavender panna cotta with honeycomb and bee pollen, which she had placed on the plates with surgical precision while her hands trembled). Ezra had sat at the end of the table and finished his wine. They had not spoken again.

Then the guests had left. The staff had cleaned up. Samira had hugged Maya goodnight and

said, *"Stay as long as you want. Breakfast is at nine. Ezra makes the coffee. It's terrible. Drink it anyway."*

And Maya had walked to the guest cottage alone, undressed alone, and lay in the dark alone, staring at the ceiling, replaying the moment in the kitchen over and over until she finally fell asleep.

Now it was morning.

Now she had to face him.

She found the coffee before she found him.

The main house kitchen was empty but warm, the air thick with the smell of brewing coffee and something baking—bread, maybe, or scones. A pot sat on the counter, dark and steaming. A note beside it, in handwriting that was careful but unpolished:

"Coffee. It's terrible. Drink it anyway. —S"

Maya poured herself a cup. It was terrible. She drank it anyway.

She was standing by the window, watching the morning light move across the vineyard, when she heard footsteps behind her.

"You're up."

Ezra's voice. Low, morning-rough, unbearably intimate.

She turned.

He stood in the doorway, holding a loaf of bread wrapped in a dish towel. He was wearing the same clothes from last night—the dark button-down, the jeans—which meant he hadn't slept either, or he had slept in them, which was somehow worse.

"The bread is from the village," he said. "Samira makes me pick it up when I visit. She says I need to 'participate in the economy of human interaction.'"

"That sounds like her."

"She's very bossy."

"You're very accommodating."

He set the bread on the counter. Their hands didn't touch, but they came close—close enough that she felt the heat of him, the same heat she had felt in the kitchen last night.

"The coffee is terrible," he said.

"Samira warned me."

"She warned you about a lot of things."

Maya looked at him. In the morning light, he looked different—softer, somehow, the angles of

his face less harsh. There were shadows under his eyes. She wanted to touch them. She wanted to ask if he had slept. She wanted to ask if he had thought about her the way she had thought about him.

Instead, she said, "What are we doing, Ezra?"

He didn't pretend not to understand. He leaned against the counter, crossed his arms, and looked at her with those gray eyes that seemed to hold the entire Pacific.

"I don't know," he said. "I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know why I'm here. I don't know why I couldn't stop watching you last night, or why I walked into the kitchen when I knew I shouldn't, or why I'm standing here right now when every part of me is screaming to get in my truck and drive back to Big Sur and never come back."

"That's a lot of not knowing."

"It's all I've got."

She set down her coffee cup. "Can I ask you something?"

"You can ask."

"That night. On the highway. Why did you stop?"

He was quiet for a long moment. The bread cooled on the counter. The coffee steamed.

Somewhere outside, a tractor started, the sound distant and rhythmic.

"I stopped," he said finally, "because you were holding the jack upside down."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the only one I have." He uncrossed his arms. Let them fall to his sides. "I don't stop for people. I don't talk to strangers. I don't remember names. But you—" He shook his head. "You were standing on the side of the road, in the fog, with your hands all cut up, and you looked at me like you weren't afraid of anything. Not the flat tire. Not the ocean. Not the fact that you were alone on a highway with a man you'd never met."

"I was afraid," she said.

"You didn't show it."

"That's different."

"Is it?"

She wanted to kiss him. The thought arrived fully formed, without permission, and settled into her chest like something that had always been there. She wanted to cross the kitchen and press her mouth to his and find out if he tasted like coffee and cedar and the particular

loneliness of a man who had forgotten how to be touched.

She did not move.

"Ezra," she said.

"Maya."

Behind them, a door opened. Footsteps. Samira's voice, bright and merciless: "Well, good morning. I see you've found the terrible coffee and the bread and each other. Should I come back in ten minutes, or are you going to stand there staring indefinitely?"

Maya stepped back. Ezra looked at the ceiling.

Samira walked to the counter, poured herself a cup of the terrible coffee, and took a long, satisfied sip. "Perfect. Just as awful as yesterday." She looked between them. "I'm going to pretend I didn't interrupt anything. You're going to pretend I'm not here. We're all going to eat bread and pretend we're a normal family having a normal breakfast."

"I'm not family," Maya said.

"You're here. You're eating. That's close enough." Samira tore a piece of bread and handed it to Maya. "Eat. You'll need your strength."

"For what?"

Samira smiled. It was not a reassuring smile. "For whatever comes next."

Breakfast lasted an hour.

They sat at the wooden table in the kitchen—the grandmother's table, bolted to the floor, scarred from decades of living—and ate bread and cheese and figs that Samira had preserved herself. The conversation was light, almost normal. Samira talked about the vineyard, the cookbook, the terrible things her sommelier had said about the Pinot Noir. Ezra said almost nothing, but he refilled Maya's coffee cup twice, and each time his fingers brushed hers.

At the end of the hour, Maya stood up.

"I should go," she said. "The drive back to LA—"

"Stay," Samira said.

Maya looked at her. "What?"

"One more night. The guest cottage is empty. There's a harvest moon tonight—it's beautiful over the vineyard. And I have a second dinner tomorrow, just a small thing, family only. You could style it. Or not style it. You could just eat."

Maya hesitated.

She looked at Ezra. He was staring at his coffee cup, his jaw tight, his hands motionless on the table.

"I'll think about it," she said.

Samira nodded, as if she had expected nothing less. "Take a walk. The vineyards are best in the morning. Ezra, show her the ridge trail."

Ezra looked up. His eyes met Maya's.

"Okay," he said.

They walked in silence for the first ten minutes.

The trail wound through the vineyards, then up a gentle slope toward a ridge that overlooked the valley. The morning fog had burned off, leaving the sky a shade of blue that seemed almost artificial. The vines were heavy with fruit, the grapes dark and ready.

Maya stopped at the top of the ridge. The view was staggering—acres of vineyards, the river below, mountains in the distance.

"It's beautiful," she said.

"It's work," Ezra said. "That's what Samira says. 'It's not beautiful, it's work. The beauty is just what happens when you do the work long enough.'"

"That's very philosophical for a carpenter."

"I build things. I have a lot of time to think."

She turned to face him. "What do you think about?"

He looked at the valley, not at her. "The past. Mostly. The things I should have done differently. The things I can't change."

"And now?"

He turned. Met her eyes.

"Now," he said, "I'm thinking about how hard it is to stand here and not touch you."

The words hung between them, fragile and dangerous.

Maya's heart was a drum. "Then don't not touch me."

Ezra moved slowly, like a man approaching a wild animal. He raised his hand. His fingers touched her cheek—just the barest contact, the tips of his fingers tracing the line of her jaw.

She closed her eyes.

"You're shaking," he said.

"So are you."

His hand cupped her face. His thumb brushed her lower lip.

"Maya."

"Ezra."

He kissed her.

It was not the kiss she had imagined in the kitchen. It was softer, slower, more uncertain. His lips were warm, slightly chapped, and he tasted like coffee and the particular sweetness of someone who had forgotten what it felt like to be wanted.

She kissed him back. Her hands found his chest, the fabric of his shirt, the heat of him beneath. She felt his heart—fast, uneven, alive.

When they finally broke apart, they were both breathing hard.

Ezra pressed his forehead to hers. "I don't know how to do this."

"Neither do I."

"I'm going to hurt you."

"Probably."

"That doesn't scare you?"

She pulled back just enough to look at him. His eyes were wet. He was not crying—not quite—but close.

"Everything scares me," she said. "That's not a reason to stop."

He kissed her again.

Below them, the vineyard stretched toward the river, and the harvest moon was still hours away, and neither of them knew that this was only the beginning of something that would break them both before it saved them.

But for now, on the ridge, in the morning light, they held each other like two people who had finally found something worth holding onto.

Chapter Eight

The Drive Home

Maya stayed the second night.

She told herself it was for the food—the family dinner Samira had mentioned, which turned out to be a casual affair with only twelve people, none of whom needed her professional services. She sat at the long wooden table and ate braised lamb and roasted carrots and a chocolate cake so good she almost wept, and she did not style a single plate.

She also did not kiss Ezra again.

They sat across from each other at dinner. They did not hold hands. They did not sneak away to dark corners. They talked—really talked, for the first time—about small things: books she had read, places he had traveled, the way the fog moved through Big Sur like a living thing.

After dinner, Samira had looked at them both and said, "The guest cottage has two bedrooms."

"We know," Ezra said.

"Good." Samira had kissed her brother on the cheek and hugged Maya like she had known her for years. "Drive safe tomorrow. Both of you."

Maya had walked to the cottage alone.

Ezra had walked to his truck.

He slept in the cab. She knew because she watched from the window, telling herself she was just making sure he was comfortable, telling herself she wasn't hoping he would change his mind and knock on her door.

He didn't knock.

In the morning, he was gone.

She found him at the main house, packing bread and cheese into a cooler.

"I'm driving you back," he said without looking up.

"What?"

"To LA. Your car is still at the shop in Lucia, remember? Frank called. It's ready. I'll drive you down, you pick it up, I drive back." He closed the

cooler and finally looked at her. "Unless you'd rather take a bus."

"I'd rather not take a bus."

"Then get in the truck."

She got in the truck.

The drive from Napa to Lucia took three hours.

Ezra drove with both hands on the wheel, his eyes on the road, his jaw set in a way that suggested he was concentrating very hard on not saying whatever was on his mind. Maya watched the landscape change—vineyards to hills to coastline, the fog rolling in as they approached Big Sur.

"You don't have to do this," she said somewhere around Monterey.

"Do what?"

"Drive me. Be nice to me. Kiss me on a ridge and then pretend it didn't happen."

He was quiet for so long she thought he wasn't going to answer. Then he said, "I'm not pretending it didn't happen."

"Then what are you doing?"

"I'm trying not to ruin it."

She turned in her seat to look at him. His profile was sharp against the gray sky—the broken nose, the strong jaw, the way his hair fell across his forehead. He looked tired. He looked like a man who had been carrying something heavy for a very long time.

"You're not going to ruin it," she said.

"You don't know that."

"I know you."

"You've known me for three weeks."

"I've known you for three weeks and one kiss." She reached across the console and placed her hand on his knee. He didn't flinch, but he didn't relax either. "That's enough to know that you're not a ruiner. You're just scared."

"I'm not scared."

"Everyone's scared."

"I'm not everyone."

She left her hand on his knee. After a moment, he covered it with his own.

They drove the rest of the way in silence, but it was a different kind of silence—not the silence of avoidance, but the silence of two people who had said everything they needed to say and were now just... being.

Frank's Garage looked the same as it had three weeks ago: gray building, falling letters, the faint smell of oil and old coffee. Frank himself emerged from the pit, wiping his hands on a rag, and squinted at them through the morning light.

"Ezra," he said. "And the lady with the shredded tire."

"Maya," she said.

"Frank." He shook her hand. His grip was firm, brief, and entirely professional. "Tire's done. New one, not a spare. Didn't charge you for the labor because Ezra here built my counter and I'm still in his debt."

"You don't owe me anything," Ezra said.

"I owe you everything. But we're not gonna talk about that." Frank handed Maya her keys. "She's parked out back. Runs fine. Take it easy on the highway curves."

Maya took the keys. She looked at Ezra.

He was standing with his hands in his pockets, looking at the ground, looking anywhere but at her.

"Thank you," she said. "For the drive. For the tire. For—" She stopped. She didn't know how to finish the sentence.

Ezra looked up. His gray eyes met hers.

"Can I call you?" he asked.

Her heart stuttered. "What?"

"Can I call you. Text you. Something." He shrugged one shoulder, that familiar gesture she was beginning to recognize as discomfort. "I don't know how this works. The… talking. Between drives."

She smiled. She couldn't help it. "Yes. You can call me."

"I don't have your number."

She pulled out her phone, typed in her number, and handed it to him. He typed something—his name, probably—and handed it back.

"Ezra West," she read from her screen. "You have a last name."

"Everyone has a last name."

"Yours sounds like a direction."

"It's not. It's just a name."

She put her phone away. They stood in the gravel lot, the fog pressing in, the ocean crashing somewhere out of sight. Frank had disappeared back into the garage, giving them a privacy he probably didn't know they needed.

"I should go," Maya said.

"Yeah."

"The drive to LA—"

"It's long. I know."

She stepped forward. Before she could think better of it, she rose on her toes and kissed his cheek—just a brush of her lips against his stubble, quick and soft.

"Call me," she said.

Then she got in her Subaru and drove away.

In her rearview mirror, she watched Ezra stand in the gravel lot, hands in his pockets, watching her go. He didn't wave. He didn't move.

He just stood there, a man carved from cedar and silence, until the fog swallowed him whole.

She was two hours into the drive when her phone buzzed.

She was on the 101, south of San Luis Obispo, the ocean on her right and the hills on her left. She should not look at her phone while driving. She looked anyway.

Ezra (2:17 PM): Made it home.

She waited until she found a pull-off, parked, and typed back.

Maya (2:19 PM): How was the drive?

Ezra (2:19 PM): Long. Quiet.

Maya (2:20 PM): You don't like quiet?

Ezra (2:20 PM): I like it too much.

She stared at the screen. She wanted to ask what that meant. She wanted to ask a hundred things—about his work, his past, his hands, his silence, the way he had kissed her on the ridge like she was something precious and terrifying at the same time.

Instead, she typed:

Maya (2:21 PM): I'm glad you came.

A long pause. She watched the dots appear, disappear, appear again.

Ezra (2:23 PM): I'm not.

Her heart dropped.

Ezra (2:23 PM): Not because I'm not glad. Because I am. That's the problem.

She read the message three times. Then she called him.

He answered on the second ring.

"Ezra."

"Maya."

"Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Send me a message like that and then not explain it."

He was quiet. She could hear the ocean in the background—the real ocean, not the recording, the waves crashing against the rocks below his cabin.

"I don't know how to explain it," he said finally. "I've been alone for four years. I built a life around it. A small life. A quiet life. And then you showed up on the highway with your flat tire and your jack upside down and your—" He stopped.

"My what?"

"Your face. The way you looked at me. Like I wasn't already dead."

Maya's eyes filled with tears. She blinked them back. "You're not dead."

"I was."

"Then stop being dead."

He laughed—that short, surprised sound she was beginning to crave. "You keep saying that."

"Because it keeps being true."

Another pause. The waves crashed. Somewhere in the distance, a seagull called out, lonely and persistent.

"I'll try," he said. "To call. To text. To... not be dead."

"That's all I'm asking."

"I know."

She wanted to say more. She wanted to tell him about the way her chest ached when she thought about him, the way she had washed his bandana twice and still couldn't bring herself to put it in a drawer, the way she had almost canceled the Napa job three times because she was afraid of seeing him again.

Instead, she said, "Drive safe."

"I'm already home."

"Then stay safe."

"I'll try."

They hung up.

Maya sat in her car at the pull-off, the ocean in front of her, the phone in her lap, and let herself feel the thing she had been avoiding for three weeks.

She was falling in love with him.

It was too fast. It was impossible. It was the kind of thing she had sworn she would never do again after Dahlia.

But there it was, as undeniable as the tide, as unstoppable as the fog rolling in off the Pacific.

She put the car in gear and drove home.

Chapter Nine

The First Kiss

Three days passed.

Maya worked. She styled a breakfast shoot for a cereal brand that wanted to look "wholesome but not earnest," which meant arranging granola in tiny mountains and pretending not to notice when the art director asked for more milk spillage. She consulted on a wedding cake that was supposed to be "deconstructed rustic chic," which meant the bride wanted it to look like it had fallen over but in an expensive way.

She did not text Ezra first.

Neither did he.

But on the third night, at 11:47 PM, her phone buzzed.

Ezra (11:47 PM): I can't sleep.

She was in bed, wearing an old T-shirt and watching a documentary about octopuses. She picked up her phone before the second buzz.

Maya (11:48 PM): Neither can I.

Ezra (11:48 PM): What are you doing?

Maya (11:48 PM): Watching an octopus escape a jar.

Ezra (11:49 PM): Is that a metaphor?

Maya (11:49 PM): It's a documentary.

Ezra (11:49 PM): Everything's a metaphor.

She smiled at the screen. She had been smiling at her phone for three days, every time she thought about him, which was approximately every seven minutes.

Maya (11:50 PM): Why can't you sleep?

A long pause. The documentary showed the octopus squeezing its boneless body through a hole the size of a quarter. Maya watched but didn't see.

Ezra (11:53 PM): I keep thinking about the ridge.

Her breath caught.

Maya (11:53 PM): What about it?

Ezra (11:54 PM): The way you felt. The way you kissed me back. The way you said "that's not a reason to stop."

Maya (11:54 PM): It's not.

Ezra (11:55 PM): I know.

Another pause. Longer this time.

Ezra (11:58 PM): I want to see you.

Maya's heart was a drum. She sat up in bed, the octopus forgotten.

Maya (11:58 PM): Then see me.

Ezra (11:59 PM): It's a six-hour drive.

Maya (12:00 AM): Then drive.

She stared at the screen, waiting. One minute passed. Two. Three.

Ezra (12:03 AM): I'll be there tomorrow.

She didn't sleep that night. She didn't watch the rest of the documentary. She lay in the dark, her phone pressed to her chest, and listened to her own heartbeat race toward a future she couldn't yet see.

He arrived at 4:17 PM.

She knew because she had been watching the window since noon, rearranging her apartment seventeen times, changing her outfit four times, and telling herself to calm down approximately every ninety seconds.

The green Ford pickup pulled up to the curb outside her Silver Lake building. The engine rumbled, then went silent.

Ezra got out.

He was wearing jeans and a faded blue T-shirt that had seen better days. His hair was wind-tossed from the drive. He looked up at her window—she was standing there, she realized, visible as a ghost—and raised one hand in a small, uncertain wave.

She waved back.

Then she ran down the stairs.

She met him in the courtyard, under the jacaranda tree that was still dropping purple blossoms onto the cracked tiles. The air smelled like flowers and exhaust and the particular electricity of something about to happen.

"You drove six hours," she said.

"I drove six hours."

"You could have called first."

"I could have." He put his hands in his pockets. He looked nervous—not the quiet, controlled nervousness she had seen in Napa, but real nerves, the kind that made a man shift his weight and avoid eye contact. "I wanted to surprise you."

"You did."

"Is that okay?"

She stepped forward. The distance between them shrank—three feet, two feet, one.

"It's more than okay," she said.

Then she took his hand and led him upstairs.

Her apartment had never felt smaller.

Or maybe it had never felt more full. Ezra stood in her living room, looking at her bookshelves, her collection of mismatched pottery, the photograph of her parents on the mantel. He moved slowly, taking everything in, his gray eyes soft with something she couldn't name.

"You have a lot of cookbooks," he said.

"I style food. It's research."

"You have a lot of books that aren't cookbooks, too."

"I read."

"What do you read?"

"Everything. Novels. Poetry. The backs of cereal boxes when I'm desperate."

He turned to look at her. He was standing by the window now, the late afternoon light falling across his face, and he looked so beautiful that it hurt.

"I brought you something," he said.

"You drove six hours. That's enough."

"It's not." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, wrapped package—brown paper, tied with twine. "I made it."

She took the package. Her hands were shaking.

She unwrapped it carefully, preserving the paper, and found a small wooden box inside. The wood was walnut—she recognized the grain now, the deep swirls of brown and amber. The box was the size of her palm, with a lid that fit perfectly, and on the top, carved into the wood, was a single California poppy.

"Ezra," she whispered.

"Open it."

She lifted the lid.

Inside, nestled in a bed of dried lavender, was the red bandana. The one he had given her on the highway. The one she had washed twice and kept on her nightstand.

"I found it," he said. "In the truck. After you left. You must have dropped it."

"I didn't drop it."

He looked at her. "What?"

"I didn't drop it. I left it. On purpose." She lifted the bandana out of the box. It still smelled like

cedar. "I wanted you to have something of mine. Something that would make you think of me."

Ezra stared at her. His mouth opened, then closed.

"Maya," he said.

"I know. It's crazy. We barely know each other. You changed my tire and I left you my bandana like a character in a bad romance novel. But I couldn't—I couldn't just drive away and pretend I didn't feel it. Whatever *it* is."

He stepped toward her. His hands came up, cupped her face, the same way he had done on the ridge.

"It's not crazy," he said.

"It's a little crazy."

"It's a lot crazy." His thumbs traced her cheekbones. "But I drove six hours because I couldn't stop thinking about you. I built you a box because I couldn't stop thinking about you. I'm standing in your apartment, looking at your bookshelves and your pottery and your parents' photograph, and I want to know everything. Every stupid thing. Every sad thing. Everything that made you the woman who leaves her bandana in a stranger's truck."

"Why?" she whispered.

"Because I think I'm falling in love with you," he said. "And I don't know what to do with that. I don't know how to be in love. I don't know if I'm even capable of it anymore. But I know I can't stop thinking about you. And I know that when I'm with you, I don't feel like a ghost."

Maya's eyes filled with tears. She didn't blink them back this time.

"Then don't be a ghost," she said. "Be here. With me. Right now."

He kissed her.

Not the soft, uncertain kiss from the ridge. Not the gentle brush of lips she had given him in the gravel lot. This was something else entirely—deeper, hungrier, the kiss of a man who had been starving for four years and had finally been given permission to eat.

She kissed him back with everything she had.

Her hands found his shoulders, his neck, the soft hair at the nape of his neck. He made a sound—a low, almost pained groan—and pulled her closer, his arms wrapping around her like he was afraid she would disappear.

They stumbled toward the couch. Or maybe they didn't stumble. Maybe the room just tilted. Maya

couldn't tell. All she knew was his mouth, his hands, the solid warmth of his body against hers.

They fell onto the couch together.

He pulled back just enough to look at her. His gray eyes were dark, his pupils blown wide, his chest heaving.

"Maya," he said. His voice was wrecked. "Tell me this is real."

She touched his face—his jaw, his cheek, the small scar above his eyebrow.

"It's real," she said. "I'm real. You're real. This is real."

He kissed her again.

And for the first time in four years, Ezra West let himself want something.

Not a table. Not a cabin. Not the silence of a life lived alone.

Her.

They stayed on the couch until the light faded.

They didn't have sex. Not that night. What they had was something rarer: the slow, deliberate undoing of two people who had forgotten how to be touched.

He held her. She held him. He told her about Afghanistan—not the details, not the blood, but the quiet parts. The way the dust settled on everything. The way the stars looked different there, brighter and colder. The way he had held Ramirez's hand and watched the light leave his eyes.

She told him about Dahlia. The betrayal. The divorce. The months she spent unable to eat because every meal reminded her of the life they had planned together. The way she had trained herself to stop wanting, because wanting was the first step toward losing.

"It's not," he said.

"What's not?"

"Wanting. It's not the first step toward losing. It's the first step toward living."

She looked at him in the dim light. "Who taught you that?"

"No one. I'm learning it now. From you."

She kissed him then—soft, slow, grateful.

They ordered pizza. They ate it on the couch, cross-legged, facing each other. She told him about her parents, her childhood in the San Gabriel Valley, the way her mother used to make dumplings every Sunday and refuse to teach her

the recipe because "you'll leave me one day and make them better."

He told her about Samira. About their mother's death. About the guilt he carried for not being there, for being halfway across the world when she took her last breath.

"You were serving your country," Maya said.

"I was running away," he said. "There's a difference."

"Is there?"

He looked at her. In the dark, his eyes were the color of the ocean before a storm.

"I don't know anymore," he said. "I used to think I knew everything. Right and wrong. Life and death. Love and loss. Now I don't know anything except that I want to stay on this couch with you for as long as you'll let me."

"How long is that?"

"How long will you let me?"

She took his hand. Laced her fingers through his.

"Forever," she said. "Start there."

He didn't laugh. He didn't make a joke. He just squeezed her hand and said, "Okay."

And on that couch, in that small apartment in Silver Lake, with the jacaranda blossoms falling outside and the pizza growing cold on the coffee table, they began something that neither of them was ready for but both of them desperately needed.

It was not a happy ending.

It was not an ending at all.

It was a beginning.

THE END